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TAGS: PREL PGOV EAID SCUL KIRF AM GG

SUBJECT: TWO VERY DIFFERENT SIDES OF THE SAME COIN -  
ARMENIANS IN GEORGIA AND ARMENIA

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: Ethnic Armenian Georgians living in Samtskhe-Javakheti (S-J) generally want their province to remain as part of Georgia, albeit with tacit recognition by Tbilisi of Armenian as a regional language. For Ethnic Armenian Georgians (or Javakhs), the grass is indeed not greener on the Armenian side. Javakhs see fewer opportunities for themselves in Armenia, because of graft and a poor economy. Due to S-J's proximity to Armenia and the similarity of its rural conditions, Armenians see ethnic Armenian Georgians less as a Diaspora abroad and more as an ill-treated minority population in Georgia. Conversely, ethnic Armenian Georgians say they are treated as the "poor country cousins" of Armenians, and even though they share a language and culture, Armenia does not grant them any special favors. While the region is always a potential source of discord, a recent visit revealed that economic progress, although slow in coming, has begun to arrive. While Russian and/or foreign Armenian-nationalist elements could easily dredge up discontent in the region, for the moment calm remains, with a cautious interest in the outcome of opposition protests in Tbilisi. Millennium Challenge Georgia road projects will continue to improve the access of Georgian Armenians to markets throughout Georgia and in Turkey. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On a March 25-27 trip to Samtskhe-Javakheti (S-J), Tbilisi DCM and Poloffs from Yerevan and Tbilisi met with the regional governor, local government officials and NGOs. Embassies Tbilisi and Yerevan worked together on this joint visit to S-J, in part due to increased attention in Armenia press, both in the country and among the international Armenian Diaspora which highlights the so-called "plight" of ethnic Armenian Georgians in S-J. The impressions gathered by the joint visit suggest these claims are significantly exaggerated, but merit monitoring.

SJ -- You are Always on My Mind

¶3. (C) Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, many ethnic Armenian Georgians have routinely left S-J for work in Russia and send remittances to their families; as a result, many carry both Russian and Georgian passports, and now, a growing number now also have Armenian passports. There are conflicting statistics on the number of ethnic Armenian Georgians living in S-J. According to Armenian Relief Services, an Armenian Diaspora organization informally but closely tied to the Armenian-nationalist Dashnaksutyun organization, the S-J population ranges from 140,000 to 220,000. Georgian 2002 census figures estimates fewer than 140,000. The actual figures may be less, as unknown numbers work abroad and have not returned, or do so only sporadically. Ethnic Armenian Georgians reside mainly in the towns of Akhalkalaki, Akhaltsikhe, Tsalka and Ninotsminda.

If I Could Dream (It would be in Armenian)

¶4. (C) According to interlocutors in Yerevan and S-J residents themselves, the most pressing issue is S-J locals' inability to integrate fully into Georgia due to poor Georgian language skills. S-J native and Armenian MP Mayk Sanosian in Yerevan blames this inequity on poor educational facilities in S-J. He claims that Armenian Georgians are treated like "second-class citizens and are disadvantaged." The Georgian Ministry of Education over the last two years has begun to translate all Georgian textbooks into minority languages (Russian, Armenian, and Azeri). Results of the efforts are mixed. Representatives from the NGO Center for Citizen Development in Akhalkalaki (S-J) told Poloffs that the GoG textbooks were poorly translated and are filled with typos and grammatical mistakes. On March 25, Samtskhe-Javakheti Governor Lasha Chkadua said he is working with the Minister of Education and Tbilisi State University in Akhalsikhe to increase outreach to the ethnic Armenian Georgian population, including opening a new faculty targeting this population. The GOAM Diaspora Ministry proposed to build and fund a joint Armenian-Georgian Common University in Akhalkalaki, but Yerevan officials say the GoG appears not to be interested and discussions have stalled.

¶5. (C) An additional challenge with recognizing Armenian as the local language: not all S-J residents read and speak Armenian with proficiency. In fact, some in local leadership roles have attended Russian language schools and prefer to speak Russian. Nairi Iritisan, Akhalkalaki's local government representative (Gamgebeli), an ethnic Armenian, is an example of this phenomena. He admitted sheepishly that his Armenian is not very good and prefers to conduct meetings in Russian. He lamented the poor quality of Georgian

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teachers sent to teach in the region, noting that ironically, these teachers often leave speaking better Armenian, while the locals still do not master Georgian. This example may point to an underlying issue: the lack of desire to learn Georgian, based partly on a lack of information about what Georgian language skills might mean to individuals who take the time and effort to learn the language. Several contacts mentioned the successful work of the Zurab Zhvania Institute's work with training young people in Georgian language, but noted that few of these individuals were able to find jobs after completing their work at the Institute.

Kissin' Cousins, Well, Maybe Not

¶6. (C) The consensus among Akhalkalaki NGOs was that Georgia should recognize Armenian as a regional language. This rings loudest from NGOs that push a pro-Armenian agenda, notably Javakh Intelligentsia and I-Info, associated with the VIRK and Dashnak political parties respectively. The Javakh Intelligentsia chairman's office is co-located with the VIRK political party in Akhalkalaki. During a March 26 meeting, the Chairman, David Rastakian harangued the group on the plight of the region for 50 minutes, suggesting repeatedly that the solution was for the GoG to recognize Armenian as the regional language. Atak Gabrelian, head of the I-Info NGO, echoed the same opinion -- in Armenian. When asked whether it was more important for Tbilisi to recognize Armenian as a regional language or to ensure that ethnic Armenian Georgians are aware of their rights, Gabrelian answered without hesitation "recognition of the Armenian language's status." According to Kostya Vartanian, the manager of the regional Armenian language television station Parvana, the insistence on Armenian language does not indicate that Javakhs yearn to be part of Armenia: "Georgian Armenians want jobs and their language, but do not want to leave."

It's a Long, Lonely Highway

¶7. (C) Armenian MP and Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnak) S-J Bureau Chief Bagrat Sargsian (resident in Yerevan) pointed out that the health care conditions in S-J

are of significant concern to ethnic Armenian Georgians. He told Poloff the story of pregnant ethnic Armenian Georgians who prefer to travel long distances on nearly non-existent roads to cross the border into Armenia to give birth at the Catholic-built Ghakasian hospital (20 KM into Armenia) than give birth in Georgian hospitals. On March 26, Poloffs asked Akhalkalaki Gamgabeli Iritsian about the quality of local Georgian hospitals. His quick retort was to ask, "And do you think the medical care in Armenian villages is any better?" Iritsian said the fact of the matter is that ethnic Armenian Georgians may travel to Ghakasian hospital because it is closer than Tbilisi and many have relatives in Yerevan with whom they may stay if the period of care is prolonged. He underlined that the Armenians do not curry any favors for their S-J brethren. Ethnic Armenian Georgians are charged the "foreigner rates" for care, and S-J students studying in Yerevan are charged the doble rate.

Money, Honey

¶8. (C) Many residents in S-J receive remittances from abroad, but the amounts received are usually just enough to make ends meet. Many living in Akhalkalaki worked previously at the now-closed Russian military base, and its closure has made finding work difficult. Arnold Stepanian of Public Movement Multinational Georgia, told Poloff that the closure of the base significantly lessened Russian agitation in the Qof the base significantly lessened Russian agitation in the region. In his opinion, the closure underscored how vital Georgian language is to their integration. Stepanian went on to say their are fewer radical groups now in S-J, or as in the case of VIRK, certainly less influential. Vartanian said about the base closure, "Russia does what it can to bring turmoil here. Since they left, we see this now, and realize not everything they said was true." Vartanian told Poloff that an S-J native and Armenian MP had opened a sewing factory in Ninotsminda, employing 200 people. Poloffs were puzzled why more locals did not mention this, since unemployment is such a chronic problem. The reason became evident later when a member of the NGO Center for Citizen Development told Poloff that many locals were unhappy because the factory only seems to employ members of the MP's family and inner circle. There were also rumors some factory workers had not been paid for more than six months.

¶9. (C) In previous visits, Poloff had heard complaints about the lack of jobs for local residents associated with Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) road projects. Iritsian said that the local residents understand now that their expectations of getting work with MCC were inflated.

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DCM reiterated that the MCC contract does not specify that road construction companies carrying out MCC projects are required to hire local residents; however, MCC has encouraged contractors to do if possible. Iritsian said he understood, but had been told that the companies will seek to hire seventy per cent of their work force from the local population for the next round of construction.

Treat Me Nice

¶10. (C) Yerevan MP Tachat Vardapetian told poloffs recently that ethnic Armenian Georgians are increasingly concerned about growing Georgian insensitivity toward Armenian culture. Chief amongst these complaints has been allegations that Georgian Orthodox church representatives have commandeered several Armenian churches. These seizures, Vardapetian said, had greatly contributed to increased tensions and frustrations in the region, which he said, if continued, could eventually lead to violent conflict. On March 26, Father Babgen Salbian, pastor at the Armenian Apostolic Church in Akhalkalaki mentioned two disputed churches, Surp Neshan (St Mark's) in Akhaltsikhe and Kumurdo in Akhalkalaki, lamenting their disrepair and the enmity over the resolution of their ownership. "We are Christians," he said, "Why do we

have fight like this and behave so poorly to one another?

¶11. (C) Salbian told Emboffs that he had experienced Georgian bureaucratic indifference several years ago, trying to get assistance from Armenians in the U.S. to the region. First, donated clothing and other items were detained at Poti port since the materials were not consigned to any particular charitable organization. Once the paperwork was completed, the GoG demanded several thousand dollars to release the shipment. There was a months-long delay, and when the assistance finally arrived, the shipping containers were pillaged and empty. DCM offered Salbian U.S. Embassy assistance should future shipments arrive and he need help. To demonstrate the Armenian Apostolic Church's (AAC) goodwill towards the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC), Salbian said that the AAC collected toys for children and donated some of these toys to GOC to distribute further to Georgian children. He said ruefully that it would be nice if the GOG congratulated AAC on church holidays in the way that it does for the Georgian Orthodox Church. (Comment: President Saakashvili extends official greetings to the Patriarch on GOC religious holidays. Saakashvili had his second Presidential naugural at the David the Builder Church in Kutaisi. End Comment.)

¶12. (C) Embassy Yerevan reports that Armenian MPs believe the GoG deliberately keeps the region impoverished. However, statistical and anecdotal evidence does not support this allegation. A review of the Georgian budget that compares funding for each municipality in S-J indicates no bias in budget allocations. A U.S. Resident Budget Adviser who works in the Ministry of Finance pointed out that two of the cities, Akhalkalaki and Akhaltsikhe, seem to have received allocations higher than other comparable cities. Iritisian noted many improvements in the region, pointing them out during an informal walk on March 26. He said that in 2008 the local budget received approximately 1 million GEL in foreign assistance, and in 2009 he predicted it would be 9 million GEL. He highlighted the long-awaited arrival of natural gas to the region. Lack of heat in winter has been a chronic problem, but now bright yellow gas lines could be Qchronic problem, but now bright yellow gas lines could be seen which run above ground in the city. Iritisian said more than 150 homes have already been hooked up to the gas system.

¶13. (C) S-J residents now have access to Georgian news, internet, and help in accessing Georgian government structures to resolve social issues. In this perennially cold and isolated region, news had previously been limited to broadcasts from Russia and Armenia. The GoG has recently begun to fund the regional television station Parvana in Ninotsminda to translate the nightly Georgian news into Russian for local consumption. During a visit to his studio, the stations' director Vartanian said that he will also do local programming to be distributed throughout Georgia via affiliates. Vartanian now works on the internet in his office, thanks to a Kazakhstani provider operating in the region. To help locals plug into Georgian government structures, foreign donors have funded an Ombudsman representative to work in Akhalkalaki. The newly appointed representative, Seda Melkumenian, is a staunch defender of human rights, and realizes the importance of the region's integration. She stresses that students need to see their future in Georgia and the role Georgian language plays in this.

Suspicious Minds

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¶14. (C) Vardapetian and Sanosian, both resident in Yerevan, said there are suspicions, which have intensified since August 2008, that ethnic Armenian Georgians collaborated or at least sympathized with Russia's decision to undertake military action against Georgia in August 2008. Both claimed that the way GoG governs S-J via the Ministry of Internal Affairs does not engender good relations between ethnic

Armenian Georgians and Tbilisi. Ethnic Armenian Georgians in S-J have Russian passports in order to work in Russia. Vardapetian said, "They want to be loyal Georgian citizens, but (because of their Russian passports) their government often treats them as potential revolutionaries." According to Embassy Yerevan interlocutors, Georgian suspicions soared in January when two Georgian Armenians were charged with sedition and spying. Armenians with whom Yerevan Poloff spoke are adamant that these charges are false. "They are looking to make Armenians a scapegoat for what happened in August." Sanosian contends that ethnic Armenian Georgians want nothing more than to be integrated into the fabric of Georgian society.

**¶15. (C)** On March 25, Gia Andguladze, from the NGO Meskhi Democrats in Akhaltsikhe, said that the proceedings were still on-going in the above case and preferred not to comment -- a reticence unusual among NGOs. Arnold Stepanian told Emboff that Meskhi Democrats have strong links to Georgian Minister of Internal Affairs, Vano Merabishvili. Stepanian said that Merabishvili, who is from Akhaltsikhe, worked previously for the same NGO and still uses these links to monitor and influence S-J activity. According to Stepanian, the NGO reins in radical elements, redirecting them into President Saakashvili's United National Movement's (UNM) fold. Iritisian, former VIRK activist and UNM convert, now Akhalkalaki Gamgabeli, is an excellent example of this transformation.

**¶16. (C)** Other NGOs said nothing or were more muted about the espionage case, including Javakh Intelligentsia and I-Info. In a meeting on March 26, Ombudsman's representative Melkumenian commented about the case, "When you are an NGO you should know where your funding is coming from." Poloff asked about the on-going case of Vahagn Chakhalian, an ethnic Armenian from Akhalkalaki. Official Georgian reports attribute Chakhalian's arrest to stockpiling weapons and forceful entry into a municipal building, with intent to overthrow the local government. Stepanian opined that the GoG charges were inaccurate, but said that Chakhalian was "not clean either." Stepanian attributed Chakhalian's arrest to running afoul of a powerful Armenian oligarch in Moscow, with ties to the Akhalkalaki police chief. Melkumenian said that Chakhalian was arrested for forcing his way into the government building after the last local elections and vociferously denouncing the results as false. Melkumenian said that Chakhalian has a strong following, and elements of the Javakh Union are observing the on-going court case closely. She had just returned from observing the trial in Akhaltsikhe, but was tight-lipped on further details.

Comment:

**¶17. (C)** Conversations with Armenian MPs in Yerevan and civic leaders in Akhalkalaki, Akhaltsikhe and Ninotsminda underscore their similarities, but also highlight the stark contrast; while all are ethnic Armenians, they do not speak with one voice. Ethnic Armenian Georgians who reside in Tbilisi and Akhaltsikhe tend to speak Georgian quite well -- QTbilisi and Akhaltsikhe tend to speak Georgian quite well -- they must for practical reasons. For those further out in Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda, where the majority of the populations is ethnically Armenian, they see less of a need to learn Georgian. It is clear that ethnic Armenian Georgians want to integrate, but are insistent that it be on their own terms. As Metropolitan Nicolas Pachuashvili, Archbishop of Akhalkalaki told Emboff, "They must have a reason to want to learn Georgian." As the region enjoys the benefits of USG assistance in the coming years, particularly through the Millennium Challenge Corporation, the area should open to greater social integration and greater opportunities for economic development. These opportunities should provide fertile ground for the advancement of the Georgian language throughout this Armenian-speaking population.

**¶18. (U)** US Embassy Yerevan reviewed and provided comments for this cable. Embassy Yerevan provided all Yerevan-sourced information.

